

River Prinia *Prinia fluviatilis* near Lokichokio: a new species for Kenya and East Africa

Brian W. Finch

Most recent additions to the Kenyan list have been palearctic vagrants or species found near border areas of neighbouring countries. To find a breeding population of a species as yet unrecorded from any of Kenya's five neighbours, and found no closer than western Chad, is a surprise indeed.

Jeffrey James and myself were exploring the Lokichokio area in northern Kenya for four days in 2001. On the 8 August 2001 we drove southeast from the town across the Lokichokio River (just before the AMREF camp) towards Nanam village which is about 20 km from Lokichokio, on the Lotikipi Plains. Twelve kilometres south-southwest of the village we reached the Loparin River. This seasonally flooding river winds across the desert plain, which is devoid of any vegetation further than 30 m from the river. The river has its source in the Sogot Hills.

A short way from the river I could hear a piercing monotonous call coming from the vegetation growing inside the currently dry (although damp) river bed. We soon located the author of this loud call sitting on top of a spiny Papillionaceus tree (the same type that has taken over the foreshore at Lake Baringo). This tree formed a very dense cover, creating a very cool shade, and growing to a height of over 4 m. In the space of 700 m we encountered around five territories. We did not persist in exploring other parts of this river which is in excess of 70 km in length. Views from the aircraft revealed many similar rivers bordered by vegetation spilling out onto the plains.

Observations

Descriptions were taken on the spot using a recording device. The bird was similar to Pale Prinia *Prinia somalica* in appearance and that is the best species with which to make comparison. Although Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) do not indicate Pale Prinia as occurring west of Lake Turkana, it is in fact the most abundant bird species in the low Acacia scrub all around Lokichokio. We had seen many on the morning of 8 August, but the species was not seen on the plains south of Nanam as there was no suitable habitat.

Description

Smaller and slighter than Pale Prinia with a much shorter tail, markedly graduated with rounded tip, rather than long with a rather squared end. Whilst singing from the top of a tree, the bird remained perched upright, remaining perfectly still, with the short tail pointing vertically downwards.

Overall it was a much cleaner, smoother looking bird than Pale Prinia which usually appears somewhat bedraggled. Upperparts including crown were a clear greyer brown, the flight feathers were a shade browner, the tail from the upper surface a little paler. The facial markings were clear and

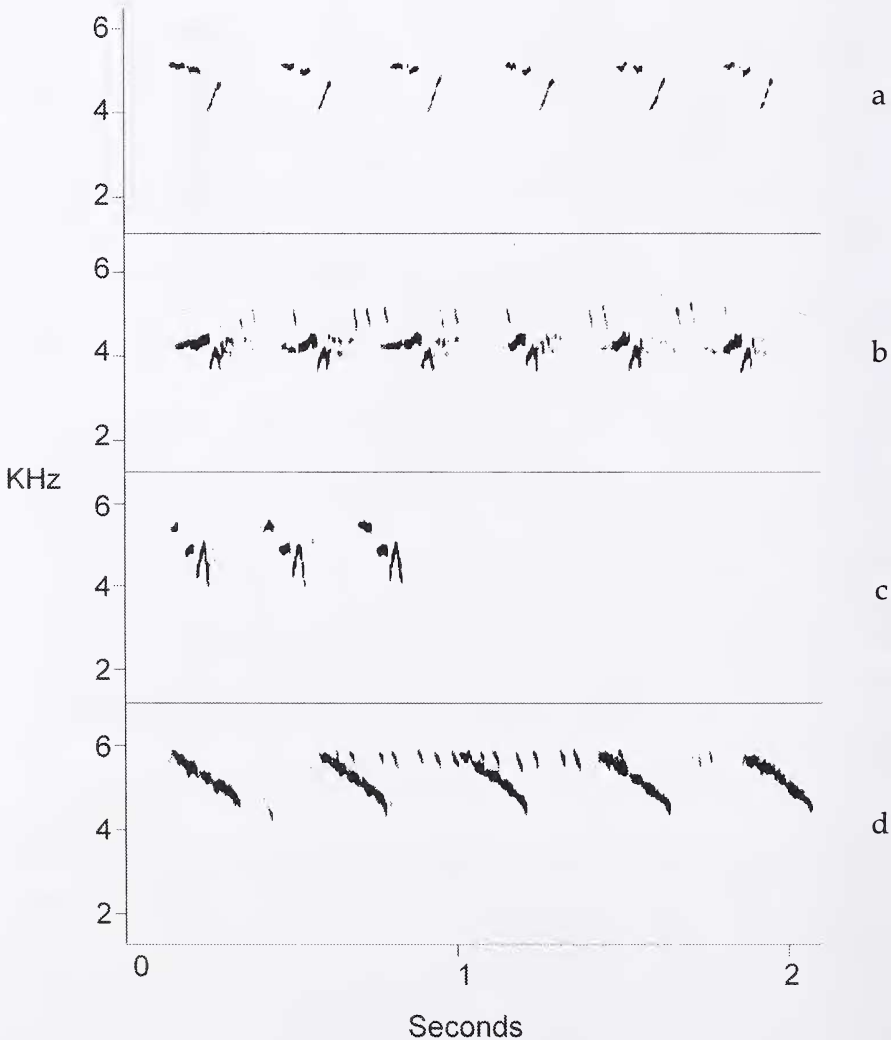


Figure 1. Sonograms of vocalisations of River Prinia *Prinia fluviatilis* recorded near Lokichokio, northern Kenya. Graphs a,b and c show variations of song type 1 and d shows song type 2, as described in the text.

distinct with a short narrow whitish supercilium stopping abruptly just behind the eye, instead of sweeping back and fading as in Pale Prinia. A blackish line ran from the base of the bill through the eye to a short distance behind the eye. The throat was whitish but the breast had a hint of lemon yellow (possibly a reflection from the vegetation) and the flanks were washed buff. The underside of the tail was buffy-white and showed dark subterminal bars and whitish tips to the tail feathers. Since the outer retrices were so much shorter, there appeared to be one dark band approximately one-third of the way down the tail, another band two-thirds the way down and the final band shortly below that.

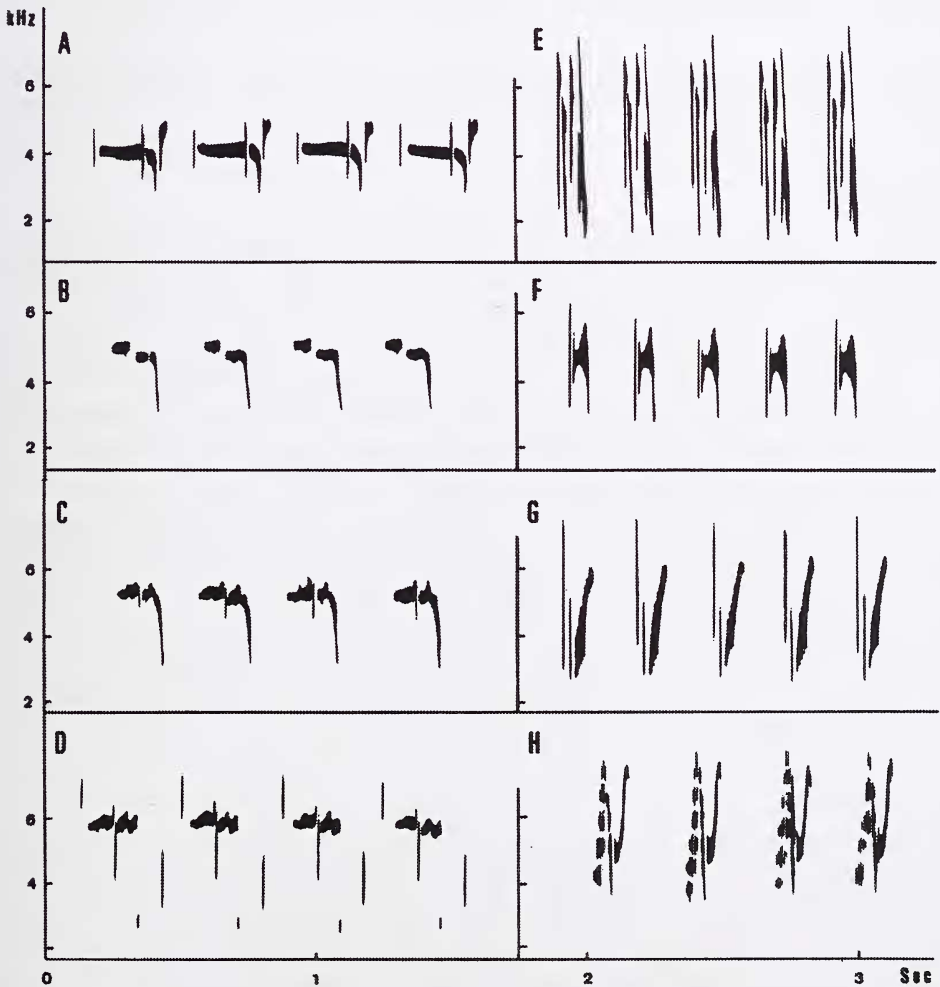


Figure 2. Songs of *P. fluviatilis* from northern Chad (A), Niger (B), northwest Senegal (C,D) and *P. subflava* from Kenya (E), central Chad (F), Ivory Coast (G) and northern Senegal (H). Reproduced from Chappuis *et al.* (1992) with kind permission of the editor.

The bill was black and quite long and slender when compared to Pale Prinia, the eyes brownish and the legs quite a bright fleshy-pink.

Habits

The habit of singing with the tail held vertically downwards has already been mentioned. Singing individuals sat completely still. Displaying males called on the wing as well as when perched, when they indulged in short sorties from one tree to another with a curious undulating skipping flight, possibly with tail slightly fanned. On landing, the female shortly arrived and the pair would chitter noisily, and engage in chases.

The males did not respond to playback of their calls, but when female churring notes were recorded and played back both sexes flew in and behaved very agitatedly as close as one and a half metres. The birds were by no means shy.

Single birds would forage inside of the vegetation, creeping around quietly at the bases of the trees, but without any nervous activity other than vertical flicking of the tail.

Vocalisations

A variety of calls were heard and a substantial amount was tape recorded (Figure 1). The first song was a very piercing, metallic, downslurred "siet-siet-siet-siet..." repeated for long periods with unvarying notes at a rate close to 3 per s. A second song was slightly lower in tone and slower with less urgency, non-metallic and more downslurred "siu-siu-siu..." given repeatedly without variation at a rate of 2 per s. A third song was similar to the first but given in punctuated series of 6–8 notes, with a short pause between each set, also given for long periods.

When duetting, the female answered the male with a short downslurred buzzy trill. When excited, the male gave a repeated loud staccato clicking. When the pair were calling together, the male also gave the first song interspersed with chipping notes very like a call of Tawny-flanked Prinia *Prinia flava*. The duet consisted of 3–4 short metallic upslurred "silit-silit-silit" notes given in series, punctuated by the female answering with single, double or triple buzzy "shrerr" notes.

Discussion

On consulting the literature (Urban *et al.* 1997) it became clear that we had stumbled on an isolated population of River Prinia *Prinia fluviatilis*, far from any known population. This was confirmed on comparing the recordings of the songs and calls I had made to those recorded by Chappuis from West Africa (Chappuis *et al.* 1992, Chappuis 2000, Figure 2). These recordings are almost identical, though his series lacks the variety found in the Kenyan birds.

The world distribution of this bird is confined to sub-Saharan Africa. With the discovery of the Lokichokio population it now has a very wide

range from Senegal in the west to Kenya in the east. However, records from across this region are few (see editorial comment below). Currently it is known from northwest Senegal, Mali and countries around Lake Chad, the closest to Kenya being Ndjamena at the south end of Lake Chad (R. Dowsett in litt., see below). It seems likely that there are other pockets of the species awaiting discovery in the many hundreds of kilometres that separate these populations. At the moment it must have one of the most curiously disjunct distributions of any African bird.

References

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Brian W. Finch

P.O. Box 15568, Nairobi, Kenya

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Editorial comment

This record has been accepted by the East Africa Rarities Committee. R. Dowsett (in litt.) has provided additional comment on the distribution of this species: "There are hitherto published (specimen or tape) records from: Senegal (Djoudj and lac Guiers, Richard-Toll); Niger (the Niger river between Tillabery and Gao, south of Gao: not in Mali, as in the summary of Chappuis *et al.* 1992 and Urban *et al.* 1997); Chad (Ndjamena, south end of Lake Chad). Subsequently, the species has been found in Mali (Gao: P. Robertson in litt.; pers. obs.); Niger (extra localities, Niamey and Tamou: J. Brouwer in litt.); Nigeria (Baga and Malamfatori, Lake Chad: Ottosson *et al.* 2002); Cameroon (Waza: not found by Scholte *et al.* 1999, but reported by M. Andrews pers. comm.). The suggestion that the species has been found in Guinea-Bissau (Barlow *et al.* 1997) is based on the supposition that nests found near water were necessarily of this species (de Naurois & Morel 1995); in the absence of vocally-certain identifications this cannot be accepted. The nearest record to the Kenyan population is thus the Ndjamena area.

"Erard (in Chappuis *et al.* 1992) mentioned the possibility of *P. fluviatilis* ranging right across Africa, in the Sahel/Sudanian contact zone (it is more correctly a purely Sahelian species); he remarked that some museum specimens from Gambela, western Ethiopia could well prove to be *fluviatilis*, though having underparts less white than Chad birds. But without accompanying evidence of their vocalisations, such specimens